At first glance, the U.S. military’s response to the incident at Minot Air Base involving the transportation of six nuclear warheads across the United States was reasonably thorough and harsh—three colonel-rank commanders were relieved of their positions, the bomber wing at Minot was decertified from its wartime missions, and a number of air force personnel lost their certifications. More action will probably come in the next few months. Defense Secretary Robert Gates asked the Defense Science Board to review the incident, and the 2008 Defense Appropriations Bill will require the Defense and Energy departments to submit a report detailing what procedures and policies they use when handling nuclear weapons.

But a closer look at the investigation doesn't give much hope that Washington will learn the proper lessons from the incident. The U.S. military is clearly at the "scapegoat" stage of its understanding of what happened. It claims that the accident was caused by human error; according to a Defense representative, it was "a failure to follow procedures, procedures which have proven to be sound." The irony of this statement seemed to elude the official (and much of the press, for that matter).

Once scrutiny of the mishap extends beyond the U.S. Air Force, people will certainly go beyond the simplistic "human error" explanations and start asking whether those "sound procedures" are the problem. While this approach would represent welcome progress in understanding the problems that made the incident possible, it's unlikely to address the root causes of the issue. Focusing on procedures will most likely result in those procedures being modified, safeguards and checks being strengthened, personnel training being improved, and so on—something the military is usually trusted to do well. But all of this has been tried before and hasn't worked.

According to a 1998 U.S. Air Force document obtained by Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists, the problems with proper handling of nuclear weapons were recognized a long time ago. That document talks about "manpower
shortfalls" and an "incapacity to provide adequate nuclear weapon security." It even mentions "efforts . . . to shore up nuclear security" that were centered at Minot. As we can see today, those efforts weren't exactly successful. And I don't think we can expect new efforts to strengthen nuclear weapon handling procedures to be any better. In fact, even the Pentagon’s leadership seems to recognize that it can promise only so much. Speaking about the incident, Gates said that "it would be silly" to expect that this kind of accident would never happen again. (Think about that--in effect, the defense secretary said that we shouldn't expect the U.S. military to guarantee the security of its nuclear warheads.)

Technically speaking, Gates is right: No one can promise that nuclear weapon security procedures will be infallible in all imaginable circumstances. The question is what should be done about it.

Since the problem, as most experts seem to agree, is the lack of proper attention to all things nuclear in the current U.S. military, a possible approach would be to force the military to take nuclear weapons seriously again. But this would be swimming against the tide: The trend in military affairs today is away from nuclear weapons, which seem unsuitable for any realistic mission. Besides, as the 1998 air force document demonstrates, there are limits to that approach.

Another way to deal with the issue is to recognize that the incident at Minot is a sign of a deeper process and that short of starting a new Cold War, no amount of organizational change could provide the military with the sense of mission required to handle nuclear weapons with the attention they deserve. If this is the case, there's a better way for the defense secretary to promise that similar accidents will not happen again without looking "silly": He would need to remove nuclear weapons from operation--the proper response to the incident.